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By Nathaniel Khaliq and Claudie Washington

It's urgent that Gov. Pawlenty and the people of Minnesota hold the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) accountable to their goal of closing the achievement gap -- and to their duty to provide just governance.

Unfortunately, the department has abused its authority in an attempt to discredit the reputation of Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy (TiZA), a public charter school that consistently meets or exceeds state averages for all students in math and reading.

Following various complaints about TiZA in the press and elsewhere, MDE secretly investigated TiZA for cheating, presumably because TiZA students perform so well. At first, senior MDE staff made a surprise visit to TiZA to observe students testing. Despite finding no testing irregularities during the surprise inspection, the Deputy Education Commissioner then hired a private test detective firm, Caveon, from Utah, at a cost to taxpayers of \$30,000, to try to find evidence of cheating.

Caveon, too, found no evidence of any cheating or testing irregularities.

The Deputy Commissioner next leaked details of a secret investigation she is conducting into the lease aid that TiZA receives to help pay for the rent for the school, because of an alleged religious affiliation.

No similar investigation is being made of the other 30-plus religious institutions that sponsor and house charter schools. TiZA learned of the investigation only through a Star Tribune article. Six weeks later, TiZA is still without any notification from MDE.

In addition, the Deputy Commissioner has withheld \$1.4 million dollars of TiZA's state and federal funding by alleging teacher licensure violations that do not exist. Based only upon allegations and without any official resolution, MDE suspended over \$800,000 in federal grants -- including a Dissemination Grant from the federal government that would have helped other schools learn how to close the achievement gap from TiZA.

Clearly, MDE has forgotten the educational priorities for Minnesota students. Quality of life for African American students continues to be threatened by a persistent achievement gap.

Results of national testing just released reveal that Minnesota has not made significant progress in closing the large gap between how well white students perform compared to students of color. The study examined math scores from the national achievement test called the NAEP. Eighth-grade black students in Minnesota scored 37 points below white students -- no significant difference from 1990.

Yet TiZA is one Minnesota school that is effectively closing the achievement gap. Over 80 percent of TiZA's students are of African descent and live in poverty.

Compare the 2009 test results:

1. 92 percent of black students at TiZA scored proficient on the Mathematics MCA test while only 34 percent of black students in Minnesota scored proficient on this test.
2. 69 percent of black students at TiZA scored proficient on the Mathematics MTELL Test while 20 percent of black students in the state scored proficient on this test.
3. 66 percent of black students at TiZA scored proficient on the Reading MCA while only 45 percent of black students in Minnesota scored proficient on this test.

Given these results, it is even more alarming to examine MDE's pattern of discriminatory treatment toward TiZA.

The St Paul branch of the NAACP has filed a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights and U.S. Department of Justice to review the actions of the MDE.

The NAACP would like to work with the MDE and schools like TiZA to provide leadership to other schools. Failure to hold the MDE officials accountable jeopardizes the future of public education for all children in Minnesota.

Nathaniel Khaliq is president of the St Paul Branch, NAACP. Claudie Washington is president of the Minnesota State Conference, NAACP.

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